

*Reading Guide to Bourdieu, P (1986) 'Postscript: Towards a "Vulgar" Critique of "Pure" Critiques', in Distinction: a social critique of the judgment of taste, London: Routledge.*

<http://www.arasite.org/bdieudis1.htm>

## Introductory Comments

This is a tough text to read and to summarise, and its main purpose is to set up the ingenious sociological explorations of categories of tastes and their connection with the social classes of which the bulk of the book consists. I find it intriguing and fruitful in explaining two more specific areas of interest of my own -- the writings of academic critiques of popular culture, such as the almost universally hostile denunciation of Disney, and the curious reactions of professional academics to student work. Both feature something approaching disgust for the more common sense offerings involved, both eschew any popular pleasures as demeaning, and both claim to offer their own work as pure and disinterested critique, although self justification and social distancing play a major part in both sorts of activities.

The discovery of the 'high' aesthetic contradicts fundamentally the tradition of philosophical or literary aesthetics, which argues for 'the indivisibility of taste, the unity of the most "pure" and most purified, the most sublime and the most sublimated tastes, and the most "impure" and "coarse", ordinary and primitive tastes' (485). As a result, pursuing the study in *Distinction* involves renouncing this tradition and all the pleasures that accompany it.

"Pure" taste and the aesthetics which provides its theory are founded on a refusal of "impure" taste... the simple, primitive form of pleasure reduced to a pleasure of the senses... a surrender to immediate sensation' (486). The whole point of such aesthetics is to refuse the 'facile', 'the disgust that is often called "visceral" for... facile music... but also "easy virtue" or an "easy lay"' (486). The category includes anything which is simple, shallow, easily decoded, 'culturally undemanding', anything which offers pleasures that are 'too immediately accessible', which includes things that might be seen as

childish or primitive. 'Vulgar' works are also seen as frivolous, or cloying. Such works involve an act of seduction, inviting the audience 'to regress to the most primitive and elementary forms of pleasure' (486).

These judgments are found in Platonic notions of the 'noble senses' (vision and hearing [nice and uninvolved]), or the primacy given to form, for example in Kant. Schopenhauer develops Kantian differences between the 'charming' and the 'sublime'. The distinction turns on immediate pleasures, or ones which are derived only from 'pure contemplation'-- thus still life paintings of food (charming) 'excite the appetite for the things they represent... thus pure aesthetical contemplation is at once annihilated and the aim of art is defeated' (Bourdieu quoting Schopenhauer, page 487). Such an aesthetics represents 'the ethos of the dominated fraction of the dominant class', for Bourdieu. 'Charming' pleasures threaten the autonomy of the subject, who is captured and deceived by the object. [An aside argues that audience participation is the crucial thing distinguishing popular entertainment from more bourgeois varieties -- in the latter participation is 'distant highly ritualised', even with jazz 'a bourgeois entertainment which mimics popular entertainment' (488)].

Pure taste refuses 'violence' [including the implied violence to the bourgeois subject], and demands respect and distance. Objects which do not display these characteristics are met with disgust, since they attempt to impose enjoyment. Disgust is 'experience of enjoyment extorted by violence, and enjoyment which arouses horror' (488), as subjects are lost in objects in an act of submission to the 'agreeable'. [Another aside analyses the grammar of Kant's *3rd Critique* showing that it depends very much on a number of exhortations and demands. This 'allows the author to remain silent as to the conditions of realisation' (489) of these utterances].

An object which 'insists on being enjoyed' is particularly threatening to the human power of suspending judgment, and thus reduces us to mere animal experiences -- 'a sort of reduction to animality, corporeality, the belly and sex' (489). It also reduces the status differences between people, since these are qualities 'which by no means confer credit or distinction upon its possessor' [Bourdieu quoting Kant, page 489]. There is a more open reference to the social basis of the opposition between pure and vulgar taste too. Instinct alone, which we have in common with animals, once guided our

choice of objects to enjoy or consume, but this total absorption by senses is confined to an early or primitive stage. Thus 'We recognise here the ideological mechanism which works by describing the terms of the opposition one establishes between the social classes as stages in an evolution (here, the progress from nature to culture)' (490).

In this way, the theory of pure taste refuses to discuss the psychological or sociological basis of the key distinctions, but refers to 'an empirical social relation' nonetheless (490). The distinction between culture and bodily pleasure is really based on the opposition between 'the cultivated bourgeoisie and the people', where the people represent 'uncultivated nature, barbarously wallowing in pure enjoyment' (490). [An aside follows some implications of this distinction, suggesting that works of art are particularly valued if they can show how vulgarity has been overcome, and Bourdieu suggests that Mahler or Beethoven display these tensions. Tensions between immediate and refined pleasures have also been explained as pleasurable by Freud, as a resolution is increasingly deferred. Thus the 'purest' form of pleasure can be 'an asceticism... a trained, sustained tension, which is the very opposite of primary, primitive [experience]' (490)].

Pure pleasure becomes a symbol of moral excellence, indicating the capacity for sublimation which defines us as truly human. 'Art is called upon to mark the difference between humans and non humans' (491). As natural impulses are overcome, humans approach divine experience. The world of arts therefore defies nature: 'gravity in dance... desire and pleasure in painting and sculpture' (491). People who are only capable of natural pleasures are not fully free or human, while those who are capable of dominating their natures assume the right 'to dominate social nature' (491). This set of associations is hard to resist except by 'a strategy of reduction or degradation, as in slang, parody, burlesque or caricature, using obscenity or scatology to turn arsy-versy, head over heels, all the "values" in which the dominant groups project and recognise their sublimity' (491), as in the Carnival.

This theory of beauty can also be seen as an 'occupational ideology' for artists from Leonardo to Paul Klee. It lies behind the Kantian opposition between 'free' and 'mercenary' art. It justifies the position of 'pure' or 'autonomous' intellectuals. It also explains the curious position of bourgeois

intellectuals, between the common people and the courtly aristocracy -- page 492: it lies behind the characteristically German distinction between culture and mere civilisation (the mere 'simulacrum of morality'). The latter, in establishing a distance between itself and nature, tends to produce 'artificial desires... natural inclinations called luxuriousness' (Bourdieu quoting Kant, page 492). Only genuine cultivated pleasure attempts to improve the mind. Everything turns on the difference between the external forces and the internal ones responsible for moving human beings away from nature.

Hence pure pleasure, freed from all interest is opposed both to nature and to the social [aristocratic] refinements of civilisation -- a 'typically professorial aesthetic' (493). A disdain for historicism and sociologism among philosophers concealed the real social bases for this 'illusion of universality' (493). Formalisation encouraged it too. Such philosophical thought is ahistorical, and 'perfectly ethnocentric', based on the 'dispositions associated with a particular social and economic condition' (493). Thus 'the thinking of Immanuel Kant' got turned into 'the discursive schemes constituting what is called "Kantian thought"' (493). The real power of Kantian thought is that its formal categories 'enable social positions to be expressed and experienced in a form conforming to the norms of expression of a specific field' (494). This is not to say that we can reduce Kant's text to some crude ideology carving out a role for the intelligentsia between the aristocracy in the people, but nor is it a pure philosophy.

The analysis now turns to the reading of Kant's *Critique of Judgment* offered by Derrida. This exposes some flaws but maintains the basic structure. Derrida sees behind the formal opposition between beauty and charm, and sees the connection between the gross tastes of the people and the pure tastes of the bourgeoisie. He sees that disgust may be the origin of pure taste, and hints that the whole system might be reduced to the difference between free and mercenary art. However, these links are only suggested: Derrida's real purpose is still to formalise, and he cannot break with the notion of a 'philosophical text', which sits in opposition too all other 'vulgar' discourses (495). Derrida agrees to play the game of trying to pin down some pure pleasure, while remaining indifferent to the conditions of existence of such pleasure. As usual, the more unreal and indifferent the text, the more likely it is to be accepted as philosophy. As a result, Derrida can only arrive at philosophical truths, and he supports the overall game of philosophy, even

while performing the occasional transgression --'the philosophical way of talking about philosophy de-realises everything that can be said about philosophy' (495)

Even radical philosophers want to retain membership in the philosophical field. This field has been defined by earlier philosophers and has now become 'objectified', appearing as a 'sort of autonomous world' which limits newcomers (496). To question these definitions is to disqualify oneself as a philosopher, hence all would-be philosophers 'have a life-or-death interest... in the existence of this repository of consecrated texts, a mastery of which constitutes the core of their specific capital' (496). This prevents a radical critique. Even the most critical works still help preserve this stock of consecrated texts -- even the 'philosophical "deconstruction" of philosophy' is really a continuation, 'the only philosophical answer to the destruction of philosophy' (496). [An aside indicates that the technique of objectifying the tradition one belongs to in order to launch some critical commentary can be seen as a useful career move, which draws attention to philosophy and places 'the person of the [commentating] philosopher at the centre of the philosophical stage' (497)].

Such an objectification can never understand philosophy as a 'field' in this [Bourdieuian] sense [one linked to particular historical and social circumstances]. Instead, philosophical objectifications can help the philosopher play games, locating themselves both inside and outside the game simultaneously, gaining both 'the profits of transgression with the profits of membership' (497). [Another aside points out that heretical readings must set themselves against orthodox ones, offering 'decentred, liberated and even subversive' readings, and thus unintentionally offering the occasional glimpse into 'social slips'-- which reveal the social origins of abstract categories].

An heretical reading may be more 'pure' compared to 'the ordinary ritual of idolatrous reading' (498), but it still wishes to be treated as a work of art in its own right. As a result, it emphasises the pleasures of the text, denying its intention to do social distinction, and appearing as a simple pleasure of play, via 'subtle allusions, deferent or irreverent references, expected or unusual associations' (498). Proust analyses this well, by demonstrating all the references alluded to in a particular text, all the associations and resonances,

all the images of beauty conjured up by the reading (including his own recollection of visits to exotic places) . He admits that this pleasure may be based on 'egoistic self regard' a 'mingled joy of art and erudition' (Bourdieu quoting Proust, page 499). This gives the clue to cultivated pleasure as a matter of demonstrating these intertwined references [sometimes referred to as the 'richness' or 'depth', or even, as in Barthes, the 'textuality' of a text as opposed to that of a mere 'work']. This is always a "society" game, based, as Proust again says, on a "freemasonry of customs and a heritage of traditions" (499). It is addressed to those in the know, and accompanied by a refusal to explain to those who are not. It includes 'unending allusions that the vulgar do not perceive' (499) and an ability to decipher these solutions shows that you belong to an elite.

Thus, behind the most apparently disinterested pure tastes, lies the pleasure of making subtle forms of social distinction, enjoying the 'denied experience of a social relationship of membership and exclusion' (499). This is not openly asserted, but finds itself demonstrated in the exclusion of inferior activities and choices, including naive problems and trivial questions [Bourdieu includes such vulgar questions as 'Did Kant get it right?', or 'Is Derrida's reading better?']. Thus philosophy merely reproduces the 'visceral disgust at vulgarity', in this case the vulgarity of examining and assessing the social origins and determinations of philosophical texts themselves.

<http://www.arasite.org/nbdieu2.htm>

*P. Bourdieu's Sociology of Taste -- making sense of strange movies*

1. Bourdieu's work helps us address questions like 'why do people make strange and experimental films?' The issue of taste is important in these discussions: experimental pieces cannot often be grasped from a 'popular' structure of tastes, and, for that matter, our usual analyses of popular media products are not much help either. Popular media can often be grasped in terms of narratives and representations designed to smoothly involve the viewer -- but experimental pieces often refuse to represent anything, deliberately break conventional narratives, and set out to shock or alienate

viewers.

2. If you're not a sociologist, the idea that taste has a sociology might seem strange. Taste seems so personal a matter, so subjective, and so tied up with our image of ourselves as mature people. Bourdieu sets out to demonstrate that there are social patterns in matters of taste, though, that tastes are connected to major social divisions like class and gender, divisions between provincials and cosmopolitans, and between the highly and poorly educated. Indeed, tastes are used in whole structures of judgement and whole processes of social distinction that produce substantial barriers between such social groups. Bourdieu's work should be read as a description of tastes and NOT an evaluation of them: he is not condemning the popular taste, and, if anything, his sympathies lie in exposing the falsely universal nature of elite tastes.

3. It is important to see immediately that Bourdieu's work is controversial. Much of it is based on rather old data (despite the misleadingly recent dates of some of the English editions of his work), and it is very French. Some 'postmodernist' commentators believe the whole social structure has changed so dramatically that it is now pointless to refer to 'social classes' in the old sense, for example. Further, there were always exceptions to broad sociological generalisations even twenty years ago: the whole cultural scene these days certainly features much more mixing between 'high' and 'low' cultures than it did. The debates with the postmodernists are not all one-sided, though, and Bourdieu has often been cited as helping us grasp postmodernism in social class terms, as we shall see.

4. As a quick example of the work, Bourdieu (1986) features some empirical work on cultural tastes involving a questionnaire issued to respondents from different social backgrounds (what a dissertation this would make!). For example, respondents were asked about their views on what topics would make a 'beautiful, interesting, meaningless or ugly' photograph -- 'a car crash, a landscape...the bark of a tree'. The proportion saying that the bark of a tree could make a 'beautiful' photograph varied from 16% of those with no educational qualifications to 61% of those with elite h.e. qualifications. Similar patterns arose with musical tastes: 54% of manual workers, 16% of professionals, and 0% of higher education teachers expressed a preference for *The Blue Danube*, for example (I'd love to try this in Britain for, say, *My Way*).

5. Cinema-going similarly offers a pattern -- attendance is lower among the less well educated, provincials and the old. The way people think about cinema varies: only 5% of those who left school at the 'elementary' level could name up to four directors, while 22% of those with higher education could. Further, 'where some only see "a western starring Burt Lancaster", others discover an "early John Sturges" and "the latest Sam Peckinpah"'. These differences are not 'natural' or purely personal, but are linked to social class and education. The sort of analytic framework used to describe and classify films (and other texts) arises from 'a disposition acquired through the domestic or scholastic inculcation of legitimate culture'. Certain patterns of upbringing or schooling provide people with the terms, concepts, knowledge and experience to make these more abstract and technical judgements about films -- this is 'cultural capital'. Those with large amounts of it 'perceive, memorise and classify [art] differently'.

6. Different amounts of cultural capital produce different structures of taste. Let's consider two main ones: popular and high aesthetics (in the book, different combinations of inherited and acquired cultural capital, and different types of cultural capital, produce a more complicated schema). The 'popular aesthetic' is 'based on a continuity between art and life', a similarity between 'ordinary dispositions' and aesthetic ones. It favours functions over form, it dislikes experimentation, it likes, for example, logical and ordered plots in plays or films, as in life. It features a deep-rooted demand for participation, a strong desire to be able to enter the fictional world and identify with the characters. Any denial of that demand is likely to lead to 'strong feelings of hostility', 'panic mixed with revolt', because experimental art is seen as an affront to common sense and to all sensible people.

7. Persons with that aesthetic stance are quite right to feel excluded, Bourdieu insists, since the 'high aesthetic' is deliberately defined 'against the popular', as an inversion of it, as a definite way to exclude the popular and to mark off an elite grouping. It stresses cool distancing and a refusal of involvement, instead of direct emotional engagement, form rather than function, disinterest in content, an admiration for artistic effects, a taste for formal complexity and 'objectless representations'. These stresses and preferences are only possible with considerable dollops of cultural capital: when this is passed on in families, people acquire the necessary concepts and techniques effortlessly, 'naturally', 'unconsciously', as part of their taken-for-granted 'habitus' (a kind of local social world). To put it bluntly, you can afford to be cool, distanced and calmly indifferent to almost any content if



you have been raised in one of those families that has several languages, perhaps; that visits famous European museums and art galleries; that exposes its children to European and Asian film, poetry, painting and novels; that has experience of living in different cities or countries; that holidays in exotic locations and is widely travelled; owns lots of books, knows lots of academics and writers; that sees university as a place to develop culturally and make even more contacts; that has the financial security needed to avoid any worry about getting a job or having to move around or being socially mobile, a 'world freed from urgency'.

8. Let's remember that this is not an analysis which simply approves of high bourgeois aesthetics. Bourdieu goes on to analyse the ways these structures of taste are used to maintain boundaries and reinforce social distinctions. The education system is an interesting site for such processes, of course. It can help to pass on cultural capital to those not born into it -- but academic life itself is based on the same unconscious structures of taste and judgement, at least among its elite sectors. Bourdieu (1988) offers a splendid analysis of the French system (some years ago)

9. I know education is not your main interest, and you can skip this bit if you're not particularly gripped, but here is a bit from one of my own recent papers (on distance education -- in Evans and Murphy 1994) which develops a bit of Bourdieu on education:

A detailed study of French universities, using both basic statistical techniques and close textual analysis of internal documents, reveals the persistence of the effects of social location on academic success (Bourdieu, 1988). For academic staff, Bourdieu offers a sophisticated analysis of inter-faculty politics involving claims to status, and manoeuvres to maintain a solid front and a coherent discipline (roughly, the less coherent the intellectual framework, the more necessary a social coherence based on common and largely unconscious perceptions of the world, an *habitus*). In general 'The structure of the university field reflects the [complex] structure of the field of power, while its own activity of selection and indoctrination contributes to the reproduction of that structure' (ibid, p.41)

Turning to the processes of academic classification of students, Bourdieu collects evidence of social locations of students (eg girls from different social classes in a Paris selective school), grades awarded, and comments entered about them in files and references. To be very succinct, his analysis

shows that particularly frank and negative judgements are reserved for those from the 'lowest' social origins, and rarely applied to 'those with the richest cultural capital', while those in between receive a curious mixture of euphemism, coded comment, and faint praise. Actual grades awarded are more evenly distributed, but those judgements remain on file. The judgements themselves are based on a 'whole collection of disparate criteria, never clarified, hierarchized or systematized' (1988, p. 200) which are listed as 'handwriting', 'appearance', 'style', 'general culture', '"external" criteria' such as accent, elocution and diction', and 'finally and above all the bodily "hexis"' which includes 'manners and behaviour, which are often designated, very directly, in the remarks'. (1988, p. 200)(original emphasis).

It is clear that, in France at least, these judgements are 'naturalised' and socially shared 'transmitted in and through practice, beyond any specifically pedagogical intention', and they originate in experience gained from life in social locations before becoming an academic: '..they are the product of the transformation imposed by the specific logic of the university field on the forms which organize the dominant thought and expression'. A strong implication, then, is that, if they extend beyond French universities, these forms of classification are 'deeper' than mere teaching style, 'behind' rational assessment policies (a wonderful site for future research would be the final examination board as one site where judgements are delivered as opposed to mere marks), rooted deeply in the very professional activity of university academics, and largely beyond reform.

[turning to the more general work in Bourdieu 1986]

To be very brief about a massive work, it is clear that different social groups develop quite different 'readings' of cultural activities across the spectrum, that they acquire the ability to perform these readings from the cultural capital they inherit, and that these readings are used to make further distinctions between groups. Dominant groups claim a natural legitimacy for their readings, of course. These legitimate readings are based on certain concepts and codes which act as 'programmes for perception'. Those without these codes stop at '...the sensible properties [ of a cultural experience]... or at the emotional resonances aroused by these properties...[They] cannot move from the "primary stratum of the meaning we can grasp on the basis of our ordinary experience" to the "stratum of secondary meanings" ie the "level of meaning of what is signified" (Bourdieu, 1986, p.2). Naturally, this is not how those with the necessary codes see it - they have acquired

concepts and codes 'by insensible familiarization within the family circle...which implies forgetting the acquisition' (ibid, p.3).

Bourdieu goes on to explain how this basic insight can be used to explain the social patterns which he uncovers in a wide range of cultural preferences, but we also have here an explicit link with 'deep' and 'surface' approaches in education [much discussed in distance education and strongly recommended in 'normal' higher education]. The implication is that the [much admired] 'deep' approach is not merely a cognitive (or metacognitive) technique but an aesthetic, connected to much wider cultural predispositions, a source of pleasure and power, a matter of social distinction, social solidarity, and social reproduction.

Bourdieu, incidentally, has never denied that cultural capital can be acquired during schooling, but likens the process to the painful 'primitive accumulation' of economic capital, where 'like the Puritans [self made persons]...can count only on their asceticism...and get the chance to realise [their ambitions] by paying in sacrifices, renunciations, goodwill, recognition...' (1986, p.333). And even after success, there remains the crucial status differences between 'autodidacts' and those born into the dominant habitus: the former are 'too [serious and anxious]...to escape the permanent fear of ignorance or blunders, or to side-step tests by responding with the indifference of those who are not competing or the serene detachment of those who feel entitled to confess or even to flaunt their lacunae' (1986, p.330).

10. Work on the university suggests that the 'high aesthetic' is confined to a rather powerful minority. Perhaps we never routinely meet such people socially -- but we are likely to encounter them in crucial 'gatekeeping' roles, on admission to university, on examination boards, at job interviews.

11. Finally, Bourdieu's work can look very old-fashioned, and it can be criticised for using out of date categories, discredited methods, and 'serious' old politics of emancipation. I have over-emphasised the material on social class, to be fair: Bourdieu is well aware of the interactions between social class, gender and educational qualifications (as well as regional differences), so he is far from being an old-fashioned marxist! Nevertheless, the old patterns of culture and distinction are breaking down for postmodernists, and so the analysis must be abandoned. As Wacquant (1993) makes clear, though, Bourdieu is quite capable of a critical response: postmodernism

itself reflects the tastes of the 'petit bourgeoisie', especially of that fraction which has more educational cultural capital than inherited cultural capital. In their struggles to draw boundaries around themselves and gain advantages, that group talks up a picture of constant cultural change, and smites its 'serious' rivals with philosophical underminings of the old certainties (including the old barriers between cultural specialisms), and ironic detachment verging on cynicism -- all the central features of 'postmodernism' in fact! In classic terms, these rather particular values are alleged to be universal cultural trends which 'must' be happening. This sort of work has given much comfort to (usually marxist) critics of 'postmodernism' and is found in work in cultural studies like Hewison (1987) or Urry (1990), for example.

12. Not all experimental work faithfully reflects the values of the 'high aesthetic' or the politics of the high bourgeoisie: some sets out to disturb, rattle and confound those groups, and challenge them to stay calm and detached in the face of provocation. Surrealism fits nicely here as we'll see, and so might Godard's political cinema. Strange alliances are possible between non-bourgeois groups and these provocateurs, and there are also cycles of shock and re-adjustment as the bourgeoisie learn to love being challenged. Finally, postmodernism offers other odd possibilities, as proletarians, bourgeois and capitalists in the culture industry all promote artistic experiment, as long as it threatens no radical politics.

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This is a difficult piece to summarise because it is very densely argued and frequently illustrated with examples from the substance of the book itself. I have tried to organise my notes thematically on this occasion, but the chapter itself is heavy with insight and it will reward careful reading.

Problems with existing methods of research (my headings throughout)  
Theoretical reflections on methods are not very helpful [including Habermas's?], and instead it is best to take actual examples of interactions between researchers and subjects. Writings on methodology don't take us very far either, since they often attempt to justify standardised procedures: these fail to grasp the 'almost infinitely subtle strategies that social agents deploy in the ordinary conduct of their lives' (607).

Scientific procedures are inadequate, but so are 'the anti-scientific caveats of the advocates of mystic union' (607). A note on page 608 makes the point that both quantitative and qualitative methods constrain the interaction they can take place, and this is often unrealised by exponents -- even 'the ethnomethodologists, whose objectivist view of the social world leads them to ignore the effects exerted by objective structures not just on the interactions they record and analyse... but also on their own interaction with those who are subjected to their observation or questioning'.

### **The distortions of research**

Research is always an intrusion into social interaction. Researchers and respondents are likely to have different objects, and this distance must be understood as having effects. If researchers occupy a higher place in the social hierarchy, possessing different kinds or amounts of linguistic capital, these effects may be amplified. Thus there is always the potential for symbolic violence.

### **Preferred approaches and procedures**

Sociologists must be aware of the distortions introduced by the research relationship. This requires a deep kind of reflexivity, which allows sociologists to monitor interviews on the spot, and to improvise hypotheses. This cannot be produced by a procedure as much as a 'sociological "feel" or sociological "eye"' (608). Researchers must gain knowledge of their own presuppositions and reflect on the effects of the research itself. All research involves constructions of knowledge, and it is essential to become aware of the work of construction and to master its effects.

What is required is 'active and methodical and listening, as far removed from the pure laissez-faire of the non-directed interview as from the interventionism of the questionnaire' (609). It requires interviewers to make a special effort to understand the 'singularity of a particular life history', but combined with 'methodical construction, founded on the knowledge of the objective conditions common to an entire social category' (609). An aside on 'intrusion' on page 610 notes how difficult it is to pursue such active listening even in ordinary conversations, while researchers can often produce 'complete amazement' followed by 'a polite response' to an inappropriate question.

This requires careful attention both to the conscious elements of interaction, such as those signs designed to encourage collaboration, and to the very structure of the relationship. Thus interviewers were encouraged to choose respondents from people they knew or from people to whom they would be introduced, since 'social proximity and familiarity provide two of the conditions of "non-violent" communication' (610). Such proximity encourages lower levels of symbolic threat -- 'that subjective reasoning [will not be] reduced to objective causes'-- and permits constant interchanges of verbal and non-verbal signs which show 'immediate and continuously confirmed agreement' (610). It is 'favourable to plain speaking' (612) . It might even be possible to encourage role play (that is, trying to pass as a member of a particular group). However, a promising approach, based on work by Labov, was to train as researchers people who already had familiar access to the sorts of respondents required. In such circumstances, interviewers and respondents are more prepared to tolerate symbolically insensitive questions, especially 'brutally objectifying questions': both participants are able to see the threat, and both share the risk of being objectified.

### Constructing an interpretation

However it is necessary to move beyond just 'collecting "natural discourse"'to begin to analyse it. Here we must recognise that we are constructing discourses scientifically 'in such a way that [they] yield the elements necessary for [their] own explanation' (611). Non-professional researchers find this especially demanding, and many were unable to do it -- their interviews were just 'dropped from the book' (612). [A bit of academic symbolic violence seems to have been practised here then. This subsequent stage, deciding how to use the data that has been collected reverts to an unequal power relationship between professional and non-professional interviewers -- at this stage there is no shared ownership. This double level has also been identified as crucial in modifying the apparently fully participatory nature of British 'action research']. As a note on page 612 points out, research interviews always run the risk of turning into two extremes: 'total overlap between investigator and respondents, when nothing can be said because, since nothing can be questioned, everything goes

without saying; and total divergence, where understanding and trust would become impossible'.

Other kinds of solidarities might be developed between researchers and respondents, not involving immediate proximity but equally acting as 'guarantees of sympathetic comprehension ...family relations or childhood friendships ... affinities between women [which helped] them to overcome the obstacles linked differences of social situation -- in particular the fear of patronising class attitudes which, when the sociologist is perceived as socially superior, is often added to the very general, if not universal, fear of being turned into an object' (612).

However, social distance is likely to remain between interviewers and respondents. Respondents are not always the underdogs, but can sometimes master the situation for themselves, of course. Considerable effort is often required to construct research interviews as 'natural', which conceals the effects of social distance. Some sociologists are able to signal (by 'tone' and by questions asked, the presentation and conduct of the interview) that they want to permit respondents to 'legitimately be themselves' despite the distance between them. Researchers are aware that they do not simply share the same point of view, but are still capable of 'mentally putting themselves in [the respondent's] place' (613). This is not merely a matter of 'projection' or empathy, but can only arise from a proper grasp of the social relations involved, such as 'the circumstances of life and the social mechanisms that affect the entire category to which any individual belongs' (613). This helps the respondent makes sense of the interview and the social situation out of which responses emerge. Interviewers are required to have considerable knowledge of the subject and of the social relations involved, far more than is required by more routine research.

This knowledge also helps 'constant improvisation of pertinent questions, genuine hypotheses' aimed at more complete revelations (613). However, researchers must still attend to others and display a 'self-abnegation and openness rarely encountered in every day life' (614). It is easy to be inattentive and to accept 'immediate half understanding'. The process is perhaps best understood as a form of spiritual conversion, a 'forgetfulness of self... a true conversion of the way we look at other people... if the capacity to take that person and understand and just as they are in their distinctive necessity... a sort of intellectual love' (614).

These preconditions permits an 'extra-ordinary discourse, which might never have been spoken, but which was already there, merely awaiting the conditions for its actualisation' (614). A note suggests that we should 'aim to propose and not impose, to formulate suggestions sometimes explicitly presented as such... and intended to offer multiple, open-ended continuations to the interviewee's argument, to their hesitations or searchings for

appropriate expression' (614 - 15). Respondents often see themselves as offered a unique opportunity to explain themselves. In doing so, as 'an induced and accompanied self analysis', they can even experience a 'joy in expression' (615). Sometimes this leads to the expression of 'experiences and thoughts long kept unsaid or repressed' (615). However, an aside explores some further complexities:

(a) interviewees can take a chance to present themselves in the best light, sometimes censoring their opinions

(b) interviewees may construct a 'false, collusive objectification' of themselves, seemingly analysing themselves but 'without questioning anything essential' (616)

(c) researchers can be swept along, and engage in 'a form of intellectual narcissism which may combine with or hide within a populist sense of wonder', losing their critical penetration in favour of a recognition of their own conceptions of disadvantaged groups (616).

(d) respondents can take the interview over, asking and answering questions for themselves -- 'the researcher is taken in by the "authenticity" of the respondent's testimony... the respondent plays her expected part' (617), and both get seduced by what seems like the literary value of the speech.

Researchers should submit to the data. Paradoxically, this requires 'an act of construction' in order to properly hear what is being said, 'how to read in... words the structure of the objective relations, present and past', such as the educational establishments attended and their effects (618). This does not reduce the individuality of the respondent but attempts to explain him or her as a 'singular complexity' (618). More is involved than simply collecting conversations and studying their dynamics -- interest lies in the 'invisible structures that organise' such interactions (618).

Interviewers cannot eliminate themselves from the situation and just describe anyway. They need to adopt a 'realist construction', investigating underlying [sociological?] realities, and attempting to understand the [subjective?] realities as experienced by the respondents. This is much more fruitful than techniques like those employed in opinion polls, which appear neutral, but which impose a problematic nevertheless -- 'Their forced, artificial questions produce out of nowhere the artifacts they believe they are recording' (619). 'Opinions' are volatile and can take many forms of expression, thus it is easy to impose a problematic on them. [Indeed, we know that this is considered to be one of the skills of researchers, or, indeed academics -- to impose some framework of meaning].

The correct way is not to leave things alone, because this just leaves accepted beliefs unchallenged -- 'the terrain is then free for pre-constructions or for the automatic effects of social mechanisms at work in even the most elementary scientific operations (conception and formulation of questions, definition of categories for coding, etc)' (620). Instead, active



criticism of common-sense is required to take on common representations, including those in the media, which interpret adversely the experience of the disadvantaged. Ordinary people do not have access to social science, nor do they always say what they mean. By contrast sociology is in a position to challenge reconstructions and presuppositions, and the apparent spontaneity of opinion. Thus in researching hostility to foreigners, especially among those who do not know any, sociologists can understand it as 'displacement', accounting for contradictory experiences among the petty bourgeoisie, for example [farmers and small shopkeepers are the specific cases given here] (621). These social contradictions are 'The real basis of the discontent and dissatisfaction expressed... in this hostility... people are... both unaware of [them] and, in another sense, know them better than anyone' (621). The role of the sociologist here is 'like a midwife' [the process is compared to psychoanalysis earlier], but this is again a craft rather than an abstract way of knowing, following a 'real "disposition to pursue truth"' (621), which often leads to improvisation.

### Transcription

Transcription and analysis also offer problems. There is no neutral way to transcribe and avoid interpretation. The style chosen in this book reflects 'the pragmatics of writing' (622), illustrating 'sociologically pertinent features' by the deliberate use of subheadings, for example. There is a need to try to be faithful to the contents of the interview, while retaining an interest in readability, which forbids, for example, describing intonation, rhythm, voice, gesture and so on -- and a note on page 622 reminds us that 'irony, which is often the product of a deliberate discrepancy between body and verbal symbolism or between different levels of the verbal message, is almost inevitably lost in transcription. And the same goes for the ambiguities, double meanings, uncertainty and vagueness so characteristic of oral language'. Transcription is literally rewriting. The aim is to offer true self-expression rather than literal speech -- for example to manage hesitations, interruptions, digressions, ambiguities, references to concrete situations and so on. These often have to be omitted, since they can make transcriptions unreadable.

These transcripts can 'have the effect of a revelation, especially for those who share some general characteristics with the speaker' (623). [This certainly describes the effect on me of some of the passages in the book]. Such emotional effects 'can produce the shifts in thinking in seeing that are often the precondition for comprehension... but... also generate ambiguity, even confusion, in symbolic effects' (623). For example, it is difficult to report racist remarks without seeming to legitimate racism, or offer personal descriptions (for example of a hairstyle) without referring to personal aesthetics.

### The reader

The dilemmas affect all those who intrude by publishing -- to balance the need to influence the reader while permitting the 'risks [in] allowing people free play in the game of reading, that is, in the spontaneous ...constructions each reader necessarily puts on things read. This game is particularly dangerous when applied to texts which were not written and which, for this reason, are not protected in advance against feared or rejected readings, above all, when applied to the words of speakers to do not speak like books [and thus] have every likelihood of not finding favour in the eyes of most readers, even those with the best intentions' (623 - 4). The team noticed that some non-specialist readers read the interviews merely as confidences or gossip, and took the opportunity to socially differentiate themselves.

For this reason it was necessary to intersperse the transcripts with headings, subheadings and introductory sections to enable readers to reconstruct the writers' stance. It is essential to get people to read the transcripts with 'sustained, receptive attention', as if they were philosophical or literary texts (624). [A note on page 624 reminds us how difficult this is, since we commonly mix together readings of texts and judgements about the social standing of the writer -- 'Nothing escapes the logic of the academic unconscious which guides this **a priori** distribution of respect or indifference', and less specialist readers have even less chance to escape prejudices]. It is necessary to try to persuade readers to develop a suitable attitude towards the words they are to read [the same one as is required for interviewers, in effect]. This is particularly difficult in doing justice both to subjects and to readers, and in particular to try to be objective and yet to avoid the effect of putting the subject 'in the dock' (625). Again, attention to detail is required to maintain the point of view of the writing, e.g. refusing to 'slide unconsciously' from the personal voice to the voice of science (625).

Sociologists have to manage their own peculiar point of view, which is to take the point of view of others and resituate it within social space -- this is possible only by remaining objective about all possible points of view. This in turn requires sociologists to objectify themselves, while remaining aware of their own place in the social world and trying to reconstruct the point of view of others in other places, 'to understand that if they were in their shoes they would doubtless be and think just like them' (626).